Interview with CAPT Juel Loughney, NC, USN (Ret.). Nurse aboard hospital ship USS *Sanctuary* (AH-17). Interviewed by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 14 March 2006. (Died 2009 at age 73.)

Where are you from?

I'm from a little town called Pittston, PA. It's right between Scranton and Wilkes-Barre on 81.

My grandfather had a mining supply in Edwardsville.

Oh, that's right across the Susquehanna River. Isn't it a small world?

When did you decide you wanted to be a nurse?

I decided to be a nurse when I was a little girl. I came from a very large family. Everybody needed to know what they wanted to do when they finished high school. But when I was small, I said I always wanted to be a nurse. When I was a junior in high school, I said, "I want to be a Navy nurse."

It was during the Second World War and my brother was in the Navy and my father had been in the First World War. There was a nurse who lived right across from us and I fell in love with her. I think she was in the Navy reserve because every once in a while, I'd see her in her Navy uniform. I said, "Someday, that's going to be me." So it goes way way back.

When I finished high school, I went into our local hospital school of nursing, which was only about 15 minutes away from where I grew up. It was Pittston Hospital. They had a 3-year program. I went through the program and, when I graduated, I then worked at Pittston Hospital for about 10 years. During that time, I went to Misericordia College in Dallas, PA, which is outside of Wilkes-Barre, and received my bachelor of science degree from Misericordia. I continued to work at Pittston Hospital as an instructor at the nursing school--the same school place where I had graduated.

During that time my family went through a lot of tragedies. My mother died and my father died the year after. My youngest brother was only in 8th grade. I would loved to have made a change in my life then but it just wasn't possible.

My youngest brother was 21 when he joined the Navy in the beginning of '66. I joined the Navy the same year. I felt like it was time to do what I wanted to do for a change.

Where did you join?

I joined from Wilkes-Barre in July of '66.

Did you go to Newport for orientation?

Yes. I went for 5 or 6 weeks for indoctrination. From Newport I was sent to the Naval Hospital in Annapolis. I was there for almost 3 years--from '66 to '68. In '68 I received orders to go to Vietnam.

I left Annapolis in March of 1968 and went directly to Vietnam. My orders were for the hospital ship USS *Sanctuary*.

How did you get to Vietnam?

Back in those years, unlike today, we went over in one's and two's. I was the only one from Annapolis who had orders to go over there at that time. I went from Annapolis to

California. We then left from Norton Air Force Base. It was at Norton that I finally met three other Navy nurses who were also going to the *Sanctuary*. I had never met them before but we became fast friends because we were the only females aboard the plane that had about 250 soldiers, Marines, and sailors.

We flew to Hawaii, where we stopped over for a half hour. From there we went to Okinawa, and from there we flew directly to Danang. From the time we left Okinawa, you could hear a pin drop in that plane. I don't think anyone said a word. Once we hit Danang, we were told to stay in our seats until we were given further instructions. As we looked out the window, there were hundreds of our service people waiting to go home. They were lined up in an enclosed area and it almost looked like they were cattle. When we got off the plane, we heard a big cheer from those kids who were on their way home. It was very intimidating, though. Here we were going into the unknown.

Once we got through what looked like "customs," we were divided up into who was going where. One of the four of us had an uncle who was a Catholic Navy chaplain stationed there in Danang. He knew that Cassie Sucher was coming so he had sent a truck over to the Danang airport and picked up the four of us and we were delivered directly to NSA Danang Nurses' Quarters, which was our station hospital.

As we were leaving the airport, I noticed how drab everything was. There was no sun out. I was lucky and was able to get into the front seat with the driver and a few other people. The other nurses had to climb into the back of what they called a 4 by 4 truck. There were a couple of Marines who needed to get to their camp so they also piled into the back of the truck. As we were going down these very narrow streets, all you could see was concertina wire. I remember thinking, "We must be in the war zone." It was just a shock to see that. They had to remove the wire from across the road so we could go through. It looked like something we had seen in black and white war movies.

We dropped off the Marines and then proceeded over to the Navy area, which was NSA, and were then delivered to the nurses' quarters, where we were welcomed. In fact, there were two people I had known previously from Annapolis Naval Hospital. One was Gloria Orfino and the other was Joyce Kearns. One greeted us with a glass of scotch and water. They thought we needed it after our 24-hour trip.

They bedded us down in a Quonset hut. On a ship, you had to share a room with someone. But here everyone had their own room in the Quonset huts. It was very nice as huts go. Sometime in the middle of the night the VC began to shell the helicopter base right across from the Navy hospital. The rockets or shells would go over the hospital but every once in a while, one would fall short and hit the hospital compound. It was my first experience hearing missiles going overhead. One of the nurses came in to assure us that all we had to do was get under our beds. There were flak jackets and helmets under the beds and we were to put them on.

So there I was about 2 or 3 in the morning and I thought, "What in the world is a little girl like you from Pittston, Pennsylvania doing here under this bed in the middle of a war?" Let me tell you, it was an awakening.

The shelling went on for quite a while. The next morning, the *Sanctuary* arrived in Danang Harbor so we were finally able to be taken out to the ship. And that's when our year started.

You knew even before you went to Vietnam that the *Sanctuary* was going to be your assignment.

I did. I think I heard the previous March that I was going to go to Vietnam. So for the next 3 months I wondered what I was going to do. Watching the terrible things about the war on TV didn't help. It was a very, very stressful time those months waiting to go there.

I asked for any place in Vietnam. I thought I was lucky to get an assignment because everyone wanted to go to Vietnam. I don't know why I was chosen. There were very few nurses. There were only 29 nurses on each of the hospital ships. And that wasn't a whole lot when we were covering up to 600 patients at times.

I went over very apprehensive, mainly because I had been in nursing a long time but had never taken care of casualties. I wondered what I was going to do. I didn't think my nursing skills were that good. But once I got over there all these little things came back to me. We had no choice but to just dig in.

I took some medical and surgical books with me and I think I read them just to bone up on things. But it was a very scary time.

What did you think when you got your first look at the *Sanctuary*?

I think I was happy. Just to see this white ship with big red crosses on it. I was speechless. But, honestly, when I first looked at it, I wondered how I was going to get up into that big ship? We were in one of those very small motorized boats. Of course, it was very choppy out there, and trying to get yourself up on the platform was very difficult. But I figured I got over the airplane flight. I lived through a night at Danang, and now, at least, I would be a little safer. Once I was aboard, everyone was very gracious and welcoming.

Who was the skipper of the hospital portion of the ship at that time?

His name was [CAPT] Donald Robinson. CAPT [John L.] Neff was the line officer who was skipper of the hospital ship.

What was your job?

All of us were junior people. I was only a lieutenant at the time. We only had a couple of ensigns and a few jaygees. I would say the majority of us were lieutenants. Our chief nurse, Pat Hurst, was a commander, and her specialty was anesthesia. Her skills came in handy when they needed extra "gas-passers," as we called them. Casualties would arrive in groups and sometimes you'd just run out of the anesthesia docs so she was very vital as part of the nursing staff.

I was first assigned to what was called "Medicine." It had a hundred beds. At the far end of the hospital was the SOQ, the Sick Officers' Quarters. That section had two to a room. I spent 6 months in that particular area between the SOQ and Medicine. Then I was sent to the Intensive Care Unit for the remainder of my year, which was an experience I had not had before. Between the two places, I felt like I got a very very good education. And it probably was the most stimulating and satisfying year of my whole life in nursing.

Why was that the case?

Because we got the kids so wounded and sick. Many we could not save. But if we were not there, many would not have made it home. It was a great feeling. Every single day, we did something for somebody and made them feel better. It was very satisfying.

One of the things I had real difficulties with was my youngest brother, who went into the Navy as a corpsman 6 months before I joined the Navy. He was stationed at Naval Hospital

Portsmouth, VA This was at a time we were putting kids through corps school so quickly. We could keep them on the wards for 2 months and then they were sent right over to Vietnam. My brother Mike was lucky enough to be sent to Portsmouth Naval Hospital, then got orders to an ammunition ship out in the Med. I was very relieved because Mike was a very big target--he was a very big kid and a corpsman. We didn't save a lot of our corpsmen once they'd been wounded in Vietnam.

Why, because they so badly injured?

Yes. When the Viet Cong were looking for good targets, they'd first go for the corpsman or the radioman. If they knocked both of them out, they felt like they had a victory. Very seldom did I take care of a wounded corpsman. And every night when I'd climb up into my bed, I would cry myself to sleep thinking, "This could be Mike." Every kid that came in badly injured could have been my baby brother." Finally, after about a month, I was just very stressed out and said to myself, "Juel, you're gonna be here for a year. This is going to happen day in and day out. You'd better straighten out because it's not gonna get any better." And that sort of helped me. It was a tough year.

How did you relieve your stress in a situation like that?

I think all the wonderful folks who were there helped. We became very, very close with both the corpsmen and especially the nurses. And we lived very closely together. There were 29 of us. We had sort of an "Upstairs–Downstairs." On one deck we had the majority of the nurses. Then down a ladder, we had six or seven other nurses. But they would all come up to the little area. We called it our sitting room, where we could fit a small couch and two chairs for 29 people. Plus we had two Red Cross females who also lived in the nurse's quarters. So it was a very tight group. And we had a lot of time to talk things over. I think that helped a lot of people to relieve their stress. Everybody knew that everybody else was going through the same thing.

Did you work in one area or did you move around at all?

I worked in Medicine, which was on the C deck and I went between enlisted medicine and the Sick Officers' Quarters at the other end of that deck. I did that for 6 months and the next 6 months was all in the Intensive Care Unit. And that was it. I didn't go to any of the other wards other than for relief here or there.

In September of '68 we had a change of command, as far as our CO of the hospital was concerned. CAPT [Willard] Arentzen came as our commanding officer of the hospital. I had known him as Chief of Medicine at Annapolis. When I received orders to go to Vietnam, he got his orders shortly after I did. He said, "I want you to write to me and tell me how things are going, etc." So when he got there, he made a lot of changes. We were working 16 hours a day. It was supposed to be 12 but most of the time it was 16. Once CAPT Arentzen arrived, he was just wonderful. He said, "I'm going to interview every officer when I get there." And he sure did. He interviewed each one of us and asked what he could do to make things better for us. I think many of us said, "Take us off these 12- to 16-hour shifts." If it were necessary, we were there anyway. After that, we never were assigned 12 hours shifts. We probably worked just as hard but I thought he was very good--very human and I was very thankful when he arrived.

There was always a little bit of competition between the two hospital ships--the *Repose* and the *Sanctuary* and also NSA Danang, where we probably had 35 nurses. One day CAPT Arentzen called me into his stateroom. He said, "Juel, I don't like the idea that there's animosity

or competition going on among the two ships and NSA. I'm going to send you over to NSA for a couple of weeks. I know they don't want you over there, but if you have to bend over backwards to please them, that's what you're going to do."

Of course, that was another stressful thing. I was shipped over there for about 2 or 3 weeks. I went there by boat and NSA Danang had to send a nurse over to replace me on the *Sanctuary*.

But that was a great eye-opener once I got there. It was almost a treat for me to come off a ship, where you were on top of everybody. At NSA, I had my own room in one of the Quonset huts. It was almost like being on an R&R as far as the location. Right across from the nurse's quarters was the officers' club. If you weren't on duty, you could be over there. Every once in a while, you could have someone drive you over to what was called "Freedom Hill." It was just one huge exchange, and it was a luxury being able to go over and look around. We were also able to get to China Beach. Anyway, it was a different experience of me for those 3 weeks.

We worked very hard. Our patient load was just as heavy there as it was on the hospital ship. But the living conditions made it so much easier. But then I was happy to go home again. By then, it felt like the ship was home after being on it for so long. But CAPT Arentzen's idea was a very good one.

When I got back, CAPT Arentzen asked me to write about what I thought about the experience there. I told him that even though there was the danger of rocket attacks, I felt it was just a little easier on the nerves when you had your own space instead of being cooped up all the time on a small ship.

What was a typical day like for you on *Sanctuary*?

I'd get up and go to breakfast. Of course, that's when they had an officer dining room separate from the enlisted mess. We were all assigned a seat for lunch and for dinner where you were seated according to rank. But for breakfast you could sit anywhere.

Our food was not too bad--not bad at all. Then we went to work and worked however long it would take to care for our patients. Some days--10 hours; other days, longer. Many times we were too busy to get up to lunch. Often we were lucky if we could get up for supper. Many of us were working 12-hour shifts all the time, and the people working nights did not want to get up in the middle of the afternoon to dress and get to the dining room for a meal. So we asked for a big supply of peanut butter, jelly, and bread, which we kept in a small refrigerator up in the nurse's quarters. So that was our meal many times. Other than that, our meals were very good. I don't think any of us lost weight. We were certainly not malnourished.

I know you saw hundreds of patients. Were there any, in particular, that you remember?

I do. When I was in the Intensive Care Unit, we had a young Marine whose name was Rusty [Donald E. Sizemore]. If we were up in the Phu Bai area, we'd get a lot of Army casualties. If we were up near Quang Tri, we'd get Marines. I recall this one time when we had many young Marines. One of them had multiple wounds, one of which was a gunshot wound through his pancreas. When he came in he weighed about 180 pounds. We had him in ICU for a couple of months because we could never get him stabilized. Every time we'd get him to a point where we thought we could medevac him, he'd start bleeding again. I'd spend hours with him. I felt so sorry for him. It was always, "LT Loughney, is it time for my pain medication yet? Jan,

you just wanted to cry with him each time. He always wanted to talk about going home to Florida and go fishing.

A general came frequently to give Purple Hearts and I remember him going to Rusty's bed. Rusty stiffened up in his bed like he was going to salute.

I became very close to him. Every time I'd go to the Vietnam Wall, I always had to touch his name on the Wall.

We had another Marine whose name was Charlie Rose. He was a triple amputee and had belly wounds, etc. When he received his Purple Heart, he wanted to sit up in bed. He only had his left arm remaining. The general said, "Let me help you sit up, son."

And he said, "No sir, this is all I have left and I have to learn how to use it." Talk about tears. It was a most emotional experience for those of us there.

One time Billy Graham came to visit. It was the afternoon shift and I was in charge. There was a knock on the ICU door. I went to the door and there was Billy Graham, who was probably 6'3" standing right next to our CO, CAPT Arentzen, who was all of 5'6" or so. "LT Loughney. This is Dr. Billy Graham, and if it's possible, he would like to visit your patients and pray over them."

So I led them into the ward and we went from patient to patient and he said a prayer and talked to each of these young people. It was startling to look into the eyes of that holy man. You thought you were in the presence of greatness. We had 15 beds there and they were always filled so we stopped at all 15 patients.

I also remember a LT Clark. I think he was a Navy pilot with multiple injuries and had just become a father shortly after he was wounded. One of the nurses must have found a picture of his baby son in his wallet. We fastened it to one of the pipes so that he could see it but he never regained consciousness. When Billy Graham got to him, he put his hand on the young man's head and said, "I wish that the likes of President Nixon could take a look at this young man. What are we doing to our kids?"

There were so many moving moments. Even on the upper decks where I worked in the medical ward. I can still see the faces of our young men kids lying in their beds recovering from malaria and other illnesses peculiar to Vietnam.

There was another kid--a southern kid--named Buford. He was a quad. He couldn't move anything. The only thing he could do to get our attention was to put his lips together to make sounds. But Buford died suddenly of cardiac arrest.

I imagine those images are in your head forever.

They are there forever. We also had a lot of Vietnamese children who would go out, get guns, and kill our Marines and soldiers. And then when they were injured, they would bring them to us. Some were only 10 or 12 years old. They arrived with massive wounds. Many we saved. Many we lost.

Did you ever take care of any VC?

Yes we did. I recall one patient we were caring for on the medical ward because he had TB plus major wounds. We had him in an isolation room. This man's most valued possession was a *Playboy* magazine. He would look at it and, of course, any time a nurse or corpsman came into his room, he'd hide it under his leg. I remember he had a Marine guard because you didn't know what the Marine patients would do if they learned we had VC right down the hall. He finally died. Even though he was beyond help, we took good care of him.

How long were you aboard altogether?
I went in March 1968 and came home in April of the following year.

What was the homecoming like for you?
Three of us came home at the same time–the chief nurse, Pat Hurst, Bobby Dentz, and I. The three of us flew back to Norton AFB and a friend of Pat Hurst picked us up because they lived in the Long Beach area. She took Bobby and myself home with her until we could get a flight back to the East Coast on the following day.

There was a whole airplane full of people coming back after spending a year over there but there was nobody to greet them.

The next day we flew home. We got a big greeting from our families but that was about it. I was only home a couple of days and my sister-in-law and I went out shopping in our little town of Pittston, PA. I looked around and everyone was having such a wonderful time. You know, I wanted to scream at them. "Why are you enjoying yourselves when we have kids dying right now in Vietnam?" That was one of the hardest things for me to get used to was the fact that people didn't know what was going on on the other side of the world. But I guess I feel the same way today.

I want to thank you so much for spending time with me this afternoon. It's always a pleasure to talk with you.
Same here, Jan.

And I certainly hope I get to see you at the meeting in San Antonio in May.
I think you will.